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SUBJECT: SAARLAND'S POPULAR MINISTER-PRESIDENT PETER  
MUELLER: A CENTER-LEFT "REBEL"

REFTEL: 2002 FRANKFURT 11411

1. (SBU) Summary: Saarland Minister-President Peter Mueller represents the center-left membership of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Known for his unorthodox, provocative political style, he one of the most outspoken CDU Minister-Presidents. He faces state elections in summer 2004 and currently has the lead in opinion polls. Mueller plans to visit the U.S. in September 2003 and seeks to expand U.S. investment in Saarland. End summary.

Unorthodox Conservative

2. (SBU) Saarland Minister-President Peter Mueller broke the 15-year reign of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Saarland in 1999 by winning an absolute majority for the CDU. He was re-elected Saarland CDU state chairman in May 2003 with 99.5 percent of the vote and has become the most popular Saarland politician since Oskar Lafontaine (the former Minister-President and SPD national chairman who left office in 1999). Mueller is outspoken and likes putting forth unconventional ideas. Though he represents a small state (population one million), he is one of the most vocal of the CDU Minister-Presidents. He has several nicknames including "black Peter" (a reference to a card game that indicates "the one who gets all the blame.") This stems from 1998, when Mueller was the first to call for Chancellor Kohl's resignation and was accused of being disloyal, though many in the party privately shared the same viewpoint.

3. (SBU) One of Mueller's closest aides, Joachim Kiefaber, is the head of the Foreign Trade Division in the Ministry of Economics and a former Free Democratic Party (FDP) caucus member of the Saarland parliament, a holdover from the former CDU-FDP coalition. He describes Mueller as religious and socially minded, noting Mueller's Social Democratic family and upbringing, often reflected in his left-of-center CDU policies. On economic policy, Mueller is a vigorous advocate of new technologies and has pushed strongly for structural change in the steel and coal industry in Saarland. Another area which interests Mueller is social reform and the Herzog Kommission, the CDU counterpart to the Ruerup commission. Mueller tends to be a mediator. This is reflected in his cabinet, with its healthy mix of conservatives and centrists. His bridge-building skills are reflected in the opinion polls: 70 percent of Saarland's voters respect Mueller as a leader.

4. (SBU) Mueller was a judge with an outstanding reputation before entering politics. On legal issues, Mueller is considered one of Germany's brightest minds. Mueller does not back away from criticizing his own party. In 1991 for example, he publicly demanded that Chancellor Kohl step down because of a broken promise on taxes. In 2002, Mueller admitted that the CDU's outrage in the Bundesrat after the immigration bill vote that approved the law (but which was ultimately overturned by the Federal Constitutional Court) was staged. The press speculated as to why he "unmasked" his CDU colleagues, particularly Hesse Minister-President Roland Koch. His staff told us that Mueller's decision reflected both his satiric humor and general frustration with political gamesmanship on the immigration issue, which he feels strongly about. Mueller's own views on immigration reform are, in fact, not far distant from many of the points in the government's proposals.

5. (SBU) Mueller's unorthodox style is reflected in his dislike of hierarchy. He is often seen in the corridors of the Chancellery visiting his staff, in contrast to his two more formal predecessors. Many on Mueller's team come from the CDU's youth wing. He was the first Minister-President to introduce paperless cabinet meetings. Everyone in his cabinet must take computer training and carries a laptop. In decision making, Mueller likes the motto, "exactness before quickness." Despite this, contacts say that he tends to change his opinion suddenly.

6. (SBU) Mueller became a national figure when he assumed chairmanship of the CDU immigration commission in 2000. He

had a personal and legal interest in the subject, not least due to the fact that Saarland shares borders with France and Luxembourg. He essentially agreed with Interior Minister Otto Schily on a draft immigration bill. Mueller blames the Green Party for blocking a compromise, but FDP contacts close to Mueller say that he was under enormous pressure by the CDU presidium and finally caved in. Mueller's aide Kiefaber said, "With his backing down on the immigration issue, Mueller made one change of direction too many. Another will cause him lost credibility and thus diminish his influence in the national CDU." Mueller's close relationship with CDU Chairperson Angela Merkel was also seriously damaged by his backing of Stoiber. Mueller said that he had had a one-on-one meeting with Merkel beforehand to explain his reasoning, but Merkel leaked it to the press, making him appear disloyal. Since then, the relationship has been cool.

#### Pro-American, Friend of France, Seeks to Expand U.S. Investment in Saarland

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17. (SBU) Mueller has a strong interest in foreign policy. This year he became representative in the Bundesrat for German-French cultural affairs, an important political position based on the Elysee Treaty. A good relationship with France is the cornerstone of Mueller's foreign policy. Mueller also seeks closer contact with neighbors Luxembourg and Belgium. Mueller is generally pro-American, but on the Iraq issue he sympathized with the French position and criticized the U.S. for allegedly disregarding international law. Mueller hopes to expand Saarland-U.S. relations and U.S. investment in Saarland and will visit the U.S. (Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania) in September 2003.

#### Facing State Elections in Summer 2004

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18. (SBU) Mueller faces his first test at the polling booth as Minister-President in summer 2004. Despite a clear lead in the opinion polls (the CDU has between 48 and 50 percent) the SPD has a realistic chance to win back Saarland for the SPD, especially if the Green Party makes it over the five percent threshold into state parliament. If the SPD gains in strength sufficiently to win back the reins of power, the composition of the Bundesrat, Germany's second house of parliament would change (although not significantly enough to overturn the current CDU/CSU-FDP majority). Mueller and his staff do not believe that Oskar Lafontaine will run for office in Saarland again. Mueller's assistant Rabel said: "Election campaigning is hard work. Lafontaine is not up for it." Mueller will campaign with the themes of Saarland's success: high growth, low unemployment, effective restructuring of the steel industry. The opposition will point to Saarland's large deficit and the fact that much of the reduction in unemployment can be attributed to demographic factors.

#### Other Biographic Information

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19. (U) Born 1955 in Illingen, Saarland, Peter Mueller studied law and political science and was appointed judge at the Saarbruecken State Court in 1986. In 1990, he was elected into the Saarbruecken State Parliament (Landtag) and served as the CDU caucus' parliamentary manager until 1994. Mueller went to the U.S. on an International Visitor Program in 1992. He became Saarland CDU party chairman in the summer of 1995, succeeding former National Minister Klaus Toepfer, his mentor. In September 1999, he was elected Minister-President, winning unexpectedly by a small margin. (Due to the absence of smaller parties in the Landtag the CDU achieved an absolute majority.) Mueller ended 15 years of SPD rule in Saarland, succeeding Minister-President Reinhard Klimmt (SPD). Mueller spoke out early in favor of a new immigration law. In 2000, he took over the chairmanship of the CDU immigration commission, a position of national prominence.

#### Comment

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110. (SBU) Popular Minister-President Mueller seems omnipresent in the small state of Saarland: his role as "state father" suits him. Though an academic and a judge, he maintains contact with the man in the street. Mueller seeks to make his party "the CSU of Saarland" reaching far into the centrist electorate. The Saarland CDU is indeed much more like the CSU in Bavaria, with no natural connections to the liberal FDP and a good relationship with the trade unions. If Mueller strengthens the CDU in Saarland in the 2004 elections, his position in the national CDU will also grow. Mueller will continue to play an important role in CDU and is one of few visibly representing its center-left membership. End comment.

